

Bobby Kennedy

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Still the controversy rages

By Carol Felsenthal
American Library Assn.

Richard Nixon called him "that little SOB." Jimmy Hoffa called him a "monster." Lyndon Johnson called him "that grand-standing little runt."

Yet in his new biography of Robert Kennedy, two-time Pulitzer Prize winning historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. calls him the "tribune of the underclass" and "the most creative man in American public life."

Can they be talking about the same man — Bobby Kennedy? Just about the only point on which Kennedy's foes and fans agree is that Bobby incited strong emotions. From 1952, when he went to work for Joe McCarthy, the red-routing senator from Wisconsin, to 1968, when he was assassinated just moments after proclaiming victory in the crucial California presidential primary, Robert Kennedy remained a controversial figure.

Plowing through Schlesinger's "Robert Kennedy and His Times" — a thousand pages of pure praise for Bobby — will leave anyone under the age of 21 wondering what all the fuss was about. It will also leave him wondering why Kennedy wasn't a candidate for canonization, instead of a candidate for the presidency.

Schlesinger — a close friend of the Kennedy family, JFK's intellectual-in-residence and RFK's trusted advisor — has written a long, embarrassing love letter to Bobby. His statement of bias at the outset — "I was a great admirer and devoted friend of Robert Kennedy's.... But to adapt a phrase A.J.P. Taylor used in his life of Lord Beaverbrook, if it is necessary for a biographer of Robert Kennedy to regard him as evil then I am not qualified to be his biographer." — misses the point.

The fact that Schlesinger is unable to find a trace of evil in his subject pales alongside the fact that he goes to such ludicrous lengths to find evil — or at least venality — in everyone who opposed Bobby. By portraying this most complex of the Kennedy clan as a hero crossing swords with the forces of darkness, Schlesinger ignores the very qualities that made Bobby such a fascinating figure.

For instance, several of Schlesinger's colleagues have argued convincingly that the Kennedys stole the 1960 election from Richard Nixon. Bobby managed that campaign for the winner, his

ROBERT KENNEDY AND HIS TIMES by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Houghton Mifflin, 1066 pages, \$19.95)
THE ASSASSINATION OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY by Jonn Christian and William Turner (Random House, 397 pages, \$12.95)



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brother. How did Bobby manage it? Not a clue from Schlesinger. Instead of making sense out of Bobby's less attractive qualities, Schlesinger makes excuses.

Bobby had the reputation for being a bully — a vicious, ruthless, relentless man. Schlesinger's Bobby is a romantic whose tough exterior hides a heart of gold; a man whose pugnacious personality can be explained — believe it or not — by his height and birthdate. (Bobby was the smallest of the Kennedy brothers and the youngest, save one.)

Historian Schlesinger regularly erases the historical record whenever that record reflects badly on Bobby. Kennedy the cold warrior, Kennedy the Communist hunter, Kennedy the wire tapper is nowhere to be found. Schlesinger doesn't cite, let alone examine, even one of Bobby's Cold War speeches. There's no mention of the fact that in 1961 Kennedy urged his brother to declare a national emergency and unleash his "emergency powers" to more efficiently fight Communists.

There's no mention of the Kennedy, who, as his brother's attorney general, would countenance bugging, wiretapping and spying on Martin Luther King; the Kennedy who helped put segregationist southern judges on the federal bench; the Kennedy who, in his singleminded fight against organized crime, acted as if the activities of a few Mafia mobsters were the number one domestic menace facing the United States.

Also missing from Schlesinger's biography is an examination of his subject's assassination — except, of course, when Schlesinger uses it to show what a brave soul Bobby was — serving the public even though he knew his fate would be the same as his brother's.

Not surprisingly — considering that the Kennedys have spawned nearly as many books as Watergate — there's now a whole book available on the subject of "The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy."

Sirhan Sirhan, a young Palestinian, shot Kennedy in full view of many eyewitnesses and a brigade

of TV cameras. Seconds later, Sirhan was arrested, still clutching the smoking gun. He was later charged with murder, tried and convicted.

Now journalist Jonn Christian and ex-FBI agent William Turner claim that Sirhan was merely a "Manchurian Candidate" hypnotized by a group of right-wing Catholics — who in turn were fronting for a group of oil millionaires. Supposedly, they programmed Sirhan to approach Kennedy in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, fire blanks, while another conspirator fired the real thing and then somehow melted into the crowd in full view of crowd and cameras.

Among the evidence the authors cite is a conversation between a man and two call girls. The man, they say, is the person who aided the Boston police by hypnotizing the Boston Strangler and getting him to trace his crimes. The hypnotist told the prostitutes that he had also hypnotized Sirhan. The authors claim that the prison psychiatrist was immediately removed from the case when he became convinced that Sirhan had been acting under a hypnotic trance.

After carefully studying ballistics reports, Christian and Turner ask why, if Sirhan fired his gun at an oncoming Kennedy from a distance of two to three feet, do all his wounds indicate that the shots came from the rear and from point-blank and near-point blank range.

They conclude by hinting that there may have been a conspiracy between the Los Angeles Police Department unit that investigated the assassination and the CIA.

Anyone who can manage to make it through this alternately dry and melodramatic book, will most likely end up believing that the authors are onto something. If an investigation is launched, watch out for a book — or two or three — when the results are in. Or probably even before they're in.

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